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Coming Distractions: Youth and Wealth in China

June 16, 2008 in [Coming Distractions](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

Both Frontline's new documentary "Young and Restless in China" (set to air on Tuesday, June 17) and Duncan Hewitt's soon-to-be-released book, *China: Getting Rich First: A Modern Social History*, take as their premise the unprecedented growth and possibility in China during the past two decades. The components of this story are youth, economic opportunity, and migration. While both Frontline's documentary and Hewitt's book provide new details and new vignettes to illustrate the changes of the last few decades, China watchers will find the basic storylines familiar.

"Young and Restless in China" (details are available at [the website](#), which after 9 p.m. on Tuesday, June 17 will also include streaming of the entire show) follows nine Chinese in their twenties and early thirties from 2004 to 2008, documenting their personal and professional lives. The program will host an online "roundtable" of China specialists and journalists (including Jeff Wasserstrom, Perry Link, and Maureen Fan) who will provide context for and discussion of the show's content, as has been done for [previous installments](#) on China.

The two-hour documentary complicates what has become a typical portrayal (in its worst incarnation) of young China as greedy and morally bankrupt—for instance, Lu Dong, who is shown shepherding his internet tailor-made dress shirt business to fruition, chats about his conversion to Christianity, while Shenzhen hotelier Xu Weimin discusses how moneymaking cannot be fulfilling in itself. Others, particularly the women featured in the documentary, illustrate the tensions between professional and personal success, such as environmental lawyer Zhang Jingjing, who cannot bring herself to settle down with her long-time boyfriend, or migrant worker Wei Jingyan, who, fearful of losing her independence, struggles over whether to break an arranged engagement with a man from her village.

The documentary is primarily interested in illustrating the contemporary lives of young Chinese, and so there is very little historical context provided for the economic policies (or the social changes) that drive their choices. Beyond that, there is no effort to connect the lives of the young Chinese who are the focus of the documentary to the lives of twenty- and thirty-somethings across the world. Increased mobility, demand for skilled labor, and challenges to gender roles are not just a Chinese story, but part of a global story that loses some of its drama when told in national isolation. (Andrew Ross's *Fast Boat to China*, for instance, attempts to address some of these issues.)

Hewitt's book, *China: Getting Rich First*, also starts by contrasting today's China to its supposedly sedate (economic) past. Hewitt, who first lived in Shanghai in the mid-1980s, is interested in sketching the ways that young Chinese differ from older generations as a way of showing how much China has changed since reform and opening. Running over 400 pages, Hewitt's book has room for many unique scenes—from a visit to a [Cosplay convention](#) to [Beijing's 798 art district](#)—but its real strength is in sketching the margins of contemporary Chinese society, from the position of gays and lesbians in China to migrant laborers. The plethora of sources and stories Hewitt uses means that there is a geographical and narrative breadth to the book that would make it a good introduction to contemporary China for visitors and tourists. Hewitt's book has been out in the UK and Canada, among other places, for almost a year now, garnering [positive reviews](#) along the way.